

# Themes in song of roland



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In *Song of Rowland*, the author tells the story of Charlemagne's attempted takeover of Saragossa, a land controlled by the Muslim king, Marsilla. The poem covers the feud between Rowland and his stepfather Ganelon, as well as the disastrous consequences that come from that feud, including the betrayal of their lord and kinsman, Charlemagne. Through characterization and plot, the author is able to convey the overall theme of the work—that of loyalty. Over the course of the poem, three characters are introduced to show varying degrees of loyalty. One of those characters is Ganelon, a vassal to Emperor Charlemagne and stepfather to the title character, Roland. After being nominated by his stepson for a suicide mission as a messenger to Marsilla, Ganelon travels to Saragossa and, acting disloyally to Charlemagne, betrays Roland to Marsilla. He tells the Muslim leader that Roland is the reason that they continue to fight, and that they will not have peace while he still lives. Ganelon even gives Marsilla the location where Roland is likely to be when they return to France, saying “ The king will reach the main pass at Sizer, while having left his guard deployed behind him. His nephew will be there, the rich Count Roland, and Olivier, whom he relies on so. They'll have a force of twenty thousand Franks. Send out a hundred thousand of your pagans...” (Roland, 583-588). Marsilla then prepares to ambush Roland and his men as they return to France with the gifts of the Muslims. Although it is debatable whether or not this move is disloyal, as Ganelon had issued Defiance to Roland, there can be a strong case made that Ganelon was acting disloyally. Ganelon first acted disloyally to his family. Roland was his stepson, so trying to harm or kill him would be seen as a disloyal act, as they are kin, if only because Ganelon was married to Roland's mother. However, Roland was carrying out Charlemagne's orders, so not only did Ganelon

betray Roland, but by default he also betrayed Charlemagne, a person that Ganelon swore an oath of loyalty to. Ganelon's first duty was to his lord, not his feud with Roland. Also, Ganelon's act of disloyalty affected more than just Roland, as he was not the only person to be killed as a result of it. Ganelon's disloyalty led to the destruction of nearly 20, 000 men. Therefore, Ganelon is the most obvious character to act disloyally, as he betrayed both his family and his lord. However, Ganelon was not the only one to act disloyal to Charlemagne. At first glance, Roland appears to be the perfect example of a model vassal. In court, he speaks against sending a messenger to negotiate a peace treaty, as the previous messengers have all been killed. He says "... some fifteen pagans he dispatched, each carrying an olive branch; they said the very same words to you then...you sent two of your counts out to the pagans (Basan was one, the other one was Basil) who promptly took their heads near Haltilie." (Roland 202-209) While he is being loyal to Charlemagne by having the best interest of the Franks at heart, Roland is inadvertently disloyal to his fellow vassals, as he speaks out of turn. As Roland was a younger vassal, he should have waited to speak until higher ranking vassals had done so. He also proves disloyal while under attack by the Muslim forces at the pass at Sizer. After seeing the size of the Muslim army, Olivier asks Roland to blow the horn and call for aid, as they are outnumbered severely. However, Roland refuses to call for assistance, saying " May God forbid...that it be said by any man alive I ever blew my horn because of pagans! My family shall never be reproved. When I am in the midst of this great battle and strike a thousand blows, then seven hundred, you'll see the blade of Durendal run blood." (Roland 1073-1079) Roland refuses to surrender his honor, even if it means the loss of his men

and even his own life. This is clearly disloyal to Charlemagne, as a loyal vassal does not get 20,000 men killed, simply because he does not want to lose honor. Therefore, while Roland was loyal for the most part, he allowed personal honor to interfere with that loyalty. Also, the loyalty to his family is called into question, as he nominated Ganelon to be the messenger back to Marsilla. As Ganelon was his stepfather, it was both disrespectful and disloyal to his family for Roland to suggest that Ganelon travel to Saragossa. Ganelon acknowledges this disloyalty, saying “ They know quite well that I am your stepsire—yet you name me to go out to Marsilla. If God should deign that I come back again, then I shall stir up such a feud with you that it will last as long as you live.” (Roland 287-291) Roland, knowing that the messenger to Marsilla would most likely be going to his death, nominates Ganelon, acting disloyal to his family, as the death of Ganelon would be detrimental to the entire family, not just Ganelon himself. The most loyal character in the poem is Olivier, Roland’s best friend and a vassal to Charlemagne. He shows his loyalty to Charlemagne, offering to go with Blancandrin back to Saragossa, saying “ But if it pleases the king, I’d like to go.” (Roland 258) Charlemagne, however, refuses, as Olivier is one of the twelve peers, and Charlemagne refuses to allow any of the twelve peers to serve as the messenger.

However, Olivier is not only a loyal vassal. He is a loyal friend as well. At the battle at the pass at Sizer, he suggests that Roland sound the horn and call for help, as they are outnumbered. Having seen the number of pagan soldiers that they are up against, Olivier advises Roland, saying “ There are many pagans, and, it seems to me, we Franks are few. Companion Roland, you should sound your horn so Charles will hear and bring the army back.” (Roland 1049-1052) He was loyal to both Charlemagne and Roland, as he

offered Roland advice in times of trouble and suggested that Roland try to avoid the deaths of 20, 000 men. He also stands by Roland, rather than leaving, even though he knows it will ultimately lead to his death. Roland, seeing that Olivier has died in the fight, acknowledges his loyalty, saying “Olivier, fair comrade, you were the son of wealthy Duke Renier, who ruled the frontier valley of Runners. To break a lance-shaft or to pierce a shield, to overcome and terrify the proud, to counsel and sustain the valorous, to overcome and terrify the gluttons, no country ever had a better knight.” (Roland 2207-2214) Olivier can be seen as the model example of a loyal vassal not only because of his loyalty to his lord, Charlemagne, but also because of his unfailing loyalty to his friend, even until death. Loyalty is not confined to the Christian side, however. Blancandrin, the Muslim vassal of Marsilla, is described as “Among the wisest pagans...very chivalrous and dutiful and able in the service of his lord.” (Roland 24-26) Blancandrin advises Marsilla to tell Charlemagne that he will accept the Christian faith, become a vassal of Charlemagne. He also advises that they offer many gifts, including hostages, in exchange for the Franks leaving Spain. He goes as far as to offer his own son as a hostage, saying “If he [Charlemagne] should ask for hostages, then send them to gain his confidence—some ten or twenty. We’ll send the sons of our own wives to him; though it will mean his death, I’ll send my own. Much better that they should lose their heads up there than we should lose our honor and our lands and let ourselves be brought to beggary.” (Roland 40-46) Blancandrin knows that his son will be killed, as he does not actually intend for Marsilla to convert to Christianity or become a vassal to Charlemagne, but merely promise to do so to get the Christian king out of Saragossa. That Blancandrin is willing to offer his own son as a

sacrifice goes to show just how loyal he is to King Marsilla. Loyalty also comes into question during the trial of Ganelon for treason against Charlemagne. Thirty of Ganelon's kinsmen are present to show support for Ganelon. One of these kinsmen is Pinabel. Pinabel places his loyalty to his kinsman, Ganelon, above his loyalty to his lord, Charlemagne. In court, he convinces the barons who decide Ganelon's fate to let him live. The barons then tell Charlemagne " Sire, we pray that you will call it quits with Ganelon—he'll serve you then in loyalty and love—and let him live, for he's a well-born man. (Count Roland's dead; you'll not see him again,) and death itself cannot return that lord, nor will we ever get him back with wealth." (Roland 3808-3813) However, Charlemagne declares that they are all traitors. Thierry places his loyalty to Charlemagne above any other loyalty. Out of loyalty to his lord, he argues that Ganelon should be punished, saying " Your service should have guaranteed [Roland's] safety. Betraying him made Ganelon a felon; he broke his oath to you and did you wrong. For this I judge that he should hang and die and that his corpse should be thrown [out to the dogs] like that of any common criminal." (Roland 3828-3833) The following battle that ensues not only determines the fate of Ganelon, but also which loyalty should come first: loyalty to kinsman or loyalty to lord. During the battle, each attempts to persuade the other to act disloyally. Pinabel asks Thierry to reconcile the king to Ganelon, while Thierry tries to persuade Pinabel to forsake Ganelon and surrender without fighting. However, both refuse. In the end Thierry defeats Pinabel, resulting in the death of Ganelon and all thirty relatives who had shown up to support him. The reasoning behind this was " A traitor kills himself as well as others." (Roland 3959) The triumph of Thierry over Pinabel did more than decide the fate of Ganelon. It can also be seen as

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a symbol that the duty and loyalty to the lord always outranks the duty and loyalty to the kin. In the epic poem Song of Roland, the theme of loyalty is explored thoroughly. Loyalty and the lack of loyalty can be seen through several characters, including Ganelon, Roland, Olivier, and Blancandrin. The poem also uses the trial of Ganelon to show that loyalty to lord always trumps loyalty to kin. Characterization, plot, and symbol served as means through which to show the theme of loyalty. Works Cited: Harrison, Robert L. " 44." The Song of Roland. New York, NY: Signet Classic, 2002. 583-88. Print. Harrison, Robert L. " 14." The Song of Roland. New York, NY: Signet Classic, 2002. 202-09. Print. Harrison, Robert L. " 85." The Song of Roland. New York, NY: Signet Classic, 2002. 1073-079. Print. Harrison, Robert L. " 20." The Song of Roland. New York, NY: Signet Classic, 2002. 287-91. Print. Harrison, Robert L. " 18." The Song of Roland. New York, NY: Signet Classic, 2002. 258. Print. Harrison, Robert L. " 82." The Song of Roland. New York, NY: Signet Classic, 2002. 1049-052. Print. Harrison, Robert L. " 163." The Song of Roland. New York, NY: Signet Classic, 2002. 2207-014. Print. Harrison, Robert L. " 3." The Song of Roland. New York, NY: Signet Classic, 2002. 22-26. Print. Harrison, Robert L. " 3." The Song of Roland. New York, NY: Signet Classic, 2002. 40-46. Print. Harrison, Robert L. " 276." The Song of Roland. New York, NY: Signet Classic, 2002. 3808-813. Print. Harrison, Robert L. " 277." The Song of Roland. New York, NY: Signet Classic, 2002. 3828-833. Print. Harrison, Robert L. " 288." The Song of Roland. New York, NY: Signet Classic, 2002. 3959. Print.